

Md. Plan for Asian Oysters Runs Into Opposition

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DOVER, Del. (AP) - Environmental officials in Delaware and New Jersey have joined the chorus of opposition to the proposed introduction of Asian oysters to the Chesapeake Bay.

Delaware and New Jersey officials distributed a joint position paper at last month's annual meeting of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission opposing a plan being considered by Maryland officials to introduce *Crassostrea ariakensis* to the bay in an effort to revive the region's oyster industry.

Scientists in Delaware and New Jersey believe more research needs to be done before a nonnative species is introduced. They are particularly concerned about the risk of parasites that might be associated with *ariakensis*, and about its ability to build reefs, a trait critical to establishing a commercial harvest industry.

Delaware fish and wildlife director Roy Miller said Tuesday that the two states issued the position paper "out of an abundance of caution."

"We're not saying this might not be a productive idea at some time in some place," Miller said. "But the time frame that Maryland is proposing, in our view, doesn't allow that good, long, hard look at all the potential risks."

Delaware scientists are concerned that if introduced into the Chesapeake, the Asian oyster eventually will wind up in the coastal waters of Delaware, where the state is trying to preserve a once-thriving industry by propping up the native oyster population.

"Once these exotics are introduced, you can't go back," Miller said.

The position taken by Delaware and New Jersey doesn't change Maryland's course of action - to bring in non-natives next year if researchers deem them safe for the bay, said Ron Franks, secretary of Maryland Department of Natural Resources. He called the other states' move "premature and alarmist."

"I don't think Maryland or Virginia wants to release something into the bay that could alter the ecosystem beyond repair. No one wants to do that," Franks said.

Maryland officials are wrapping up a year's worth of research on the oysters, which are native to China, and say they should know by February or March whether the species could bring pathogens or diseases into the bay or crowd out what is left of native oysters. But some scientists believe the existing literature is sketchy, and that five or more years of studies might be needed before such a determination can be made.

"There's all kinds of questions that oyster biologists can come up with," Miller said.

In the position paper, officials noted that it took more than a decade of field studies to conclude that another Asian species, *Crassostrea gigas*, would fare no better than the American native oyster in the Chesapeake Bay.

Maryland Gov. Bob Ehrlich emphasized again Tuesday that nonnative oysters will be introduced only if ongoing scientific studies, paid for by Maryland, Virginia and the federal government, conclude that the bivalves are safe.

The science will be "the basis of our declaration," said Ehrlich, who has made it clear that bringing in the nonnative oysters is a priority, but pledged that if the oysters are deemed unsafe, they will not be introduced.

"It will be incredibly unfortunate if that's the case," said Ehrlich, whose administration has petitioned the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to conclude work on an environmental impact statement by March, clearing the way for an introduction of the oysters in early 2005.

Fred Mumford, a spokesman for the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, said the agency would not comment beyond the concerns expressed in the position paper, which implies that Maryland and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which is coordinating the environmental study, are acting with "an abundance of optimism and a relative dearth of information."

In addition to urging Maryland to give more emphasis to traditional fisheries management techniques, Delaware and New Jersey are advocating a more active role for the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission.

Miller said its unclear what authority, if any, the commission has to halt Ehrlich's plan, which has been criticized by federal and state scientists, and at least one member of Maryland's congressional delegation.

"I'm not sure what role the commission could play in this other than as fact-finding, facilitating role," Miller said.

Robert Beal, director of ASMFC's Interstate Fisheries Management Program, was not immediately available for comment Tuesday. The commission's next meeting is scheduled for February.

Associated Press writer Gretchen Parker contributed to this report from Annapolis, Md.

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